

WORK IN PROGRESS PRESENTATION – AN TAIN ARTS CENTRE, DUNDALK

-PROGRAM NOTES & DIRECTORS OPENING SPEECH AND SCENE LINKS-

DECEMBER 2019

Prison Notebooks is a new play intended for solo performance. Based primarily on first-hand journals and other writings undertaken by Dorothy Macardle throughout her six-month incarceration as a Republican prisoner during the Irish Civil War of 1922-23. Macardle was arrested by Free State Soldiers and imprisoned without trial from November 1922 to May 1923 for her propagandist activity on behalf of the Anti-treaty Republicans.

Already an Abbey playwright at the time of her arrest, Dundalk-born Macardle (1889-1958) went on to become a major literary artist, Hollywood screenwriter, historian and international human rights advocate. Her gaol writings, undertaken in the most oppressive conditions of sensory deprivation, uncertainty and confinement, reveal not only a dedicated political activist and thinker but a developing artist of stature.

Prison Notebooks Devised and Written by Declan Gorman and Sharon McArdle is currently in the work-in-progress stage. Below is a concise treatment of six scene studies. The scenes were initially selected to represent a range of Dorothy's prison experiences as well as to explore key characters and recurring themes. It should be noted that the narrative arc has not been established, and therefore, the scenes are, at this point, 'stand-alone' studies.

Once we selected the various scenes to study, it was agreed that Sharon would take the lead on researching, collating data and developing conceptual frameworks for each scene study, and Declan would lead the scriptwriting part of the process. The figure below illustrates this collaborative cycle.

The Conceptual Framework for each scene study would encompass a range of material, including; relevant gaol journal entries, supplementary primary & secondary source material, character profiles, visual stimuli, suggestions for stage directions & theatrical devices, lighting & sound. Philosophical & Psychological theories underpin the framework and as it explores a central thematic focus.

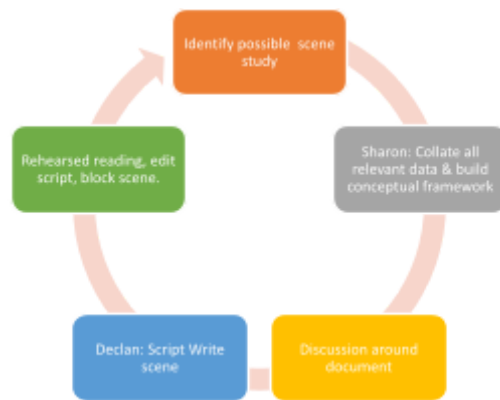


Fig.1. Collaborative Script Writing Process

DIRECTOR Good evening, everybody, and welcome to tonight’s work-in-progress presentation of PRISON NOTEBOOKS. My name is Declan Gorman. This is Sharon Macardle. And together, we have been working over the past several months, developing ideas for a solo play which shall be presented in full at Kilmainham Jail next April. The play is based upon the gaol diaries of Dorothy Macardle from Dundalk, who was arrested by Free State soldiers during the Irish Civil War and imprisoned without trial from November 1922 to May 1923 for her propagandist activity on behalf of the Anti-Treaty Republicans.

Our purpose tonight is to illustrate and discuss our artistic approach to the life and writings of Dorothy Macardle. The second part of the evening will be a conversation moderated by Mel O’Loane, where we welcome questions, comments, and responses. Throughout the evening, we hope to share with you some insights, artefacts, notebooks, display panels, and so on, which reflect the historical research as well as the artistic processes which underpin this performance work.

But to begin, Sharon will present a reading of a number of scenes. When I say a reading, I don’t mean a stand-up presentation from a lectern, but rather an “animated reading”. Sharon will work with script in hand, but moving around, seeking to suggest the enclosed physical world of the imprisoned women as well as the expansive, imaginative life of Dorothy Macardle, an artist trapped in a jail.

This is an informal presentation. As you can see, we are not using theatrical lighting. And while we will use some sound effects and voiceovers, these are quite rudimentary, recorded by ourselves over the weekend, just to give an indication of the environment that we hope eventually to create in the Kilmainham performance. For that event, we hope to have inputs from sound and visual designers and access to enhanced technical resources.

We have chosen six episodic scenes to present, starting with our opening sequence and drawing from different stages of the drama. So, this is not one continuous section of the play – rather, there are gaps in between. Where it may be useful for context, you will hear my voice filling in those gaps, introducing certain scenes or describing stage directions.

Otherwise, for the next 40 minutes or so, you will be in the hands of the actor Sharon McArdle! When the presentation is complete, we will take a 5-minute break before the discussion, during which you can pop out to refill your glass or use the bathrooms, located just along the corridor.

We shall now clear the stage and get ready to commence the presentation. We hope you enjoy it and look forward to hearing from you later – please turn off mobile phones, thank you.

Scene 1 - Opening & Mountjoy

A benign ghostly figure, wise, empathetic, embodying the spirit of the artist and humanitarian, Dorothy Macardle appears and speaks of kaleidoscope memories.

The actor assumes the persona of a young ‘ordinary criminal’ prisoner who delivers a parcel to Dorothy. It contains food, which she shares with her fellow prisoners. We understand that there is a vigil happening upstairs for Ms MacSwiney, who is on a hunger strike. Dorothy has also received a notebook, pen and ink and begins to write in her journal.

DIRECTOR And so, 13 days into her incarceration, Dorothy commences her journal proper, having scribbled on bits of borrowed paper from Day 1. In the early entries, she is less concerned with her circumstances than with a number of major political events unfolding, both outside the prison and within – in particular, the hunger strike of Mary McSwiney, an immense personage who dominates the journal narrative and appears to dominate every facet of life in the women’s prison. In this next scene, however, still, some days before the arrival of her notebooks and ink, an item of personal news arrives in the form of a letter from Maud Gonne, who goes under the name of Maeve, with whom she has been lodging prior to her arrest.

Scene 2 - Burnt offerings

This scene explores a number of recurring themes, including; The Destruction of Macardle’s Writings, Hunger striking of the Artists mind in Prison: A writer starved of paper and ink. Greek Tragedy Style.



In this scene, Dorothy receives an ‘underground’ letter from Maud Gonne, with whom she has been lodging prior to her arrest, detailing the raid at her home. She hears how her

papers, plays and poetry book have been burned in a bonfire on St. Stephens Green. Almost as though in a Greek tragedy, she laments the loss of her characters, Cassandra, Asthara, but particularly, Dervorgilla, whom she wrote innocent. She remembers that allegiance to the Republic had cost her nothing, and perhaps this was her baptism. She tells Mary MacSwiney about the incident and tries to make little of it, but 'she is too wise'. Jolting in and out of sleep, Dorothy eventually attempts to write her poetry book from memory.

DIRECTOR Scene 3 of our presentation refers to a 24-hour vigil kept by the women prisoners at the bedside – or just outside the door of the infirmary cell in which Mary MacSwiney is conducting her hunger strike. Miss MacSwiney is the sister of Terence MacSwiney, former Lord Mayor of Cork, a revered hero of the War of Independence, who died on a hunger strike one year earlier in Brixton Prison. Another sister, Annie, meanwhile, is on a hunger strike outside the prison gates in solidarity with Mary. This unfolding drama is attracting international media attention as well as preoccupying the women within the prison. Another pressing matter is the arrest and ongoing show trial of Dorothy's great companion and mentor, Erskine Childers. Lily O'Brennan, who features in this scene, is a former personal secretary to Childers.

Scene 3 - The Vigil

This Scene explores Macardle's reflections on religion and her spirituality. It explores ritual and magic as portals into the otherworld, the practice of incantations and purification as primal practice of Catholics. The scene revolves around Lilly and the symbolism of light.



This scene makes reference to a 24-hour vigil kept by the women prisoners just outside the door of the infirmary cell in which Mary MacSwiney is conducting her hunger strike. Another sister, Annie, meanwhile, is on a hunger strike outside the prison gates in solidarity with Mary. This unfolding drama is attracting international media attention as well as preoccupying the women within the prison. Another pressing matter is the arrest and ongoing show trial of Dorothy's great companion and mentor, Erskine Childers. Lily O'Brennan, who features in this scene, is a former personal secretary to Childers. The scene opens with Lily O' Brennan in conversation with Our Lady. Dorothy reflects on her heretic

self and the quaint child-likeness of Catholicism and how she feels shut out. She reprimands herself for being unable to pray as Roman Catholics do. However, she reveals that she can sometimes image things or call on beneficent powers which can help bring things (such as the opening of the gates or the release of Miss MacSwiney) to pass. Mrs Humphries, the mother Catholic here, shepherds them to prayer. They are all praying now... in order... as Miss MacSwiney asked for them, first that her sister may be let in, second that Erskine Childers may be saved from execution and third for her release. Lili experiences an apparition through a guttering candle. Tessie and Dorothy, while on Vigil, experience a strange mystery- the ghost of Terence MacSwiney, a brotherly presence. Dorothy begins to write short story 'The Prisoner' from Earthbound.

DIRECTOR Dorothy's prison diaries include quite a lot of political reflection. She is utterly convinced of the righteousness of the Republican position and writes with scorn about the Free State side, baffled and appalled at their treachery as she perceives it and disgusted by their endless capacity to conduct outrages. She sees her side as the holders of the moral as well as political high ground. As the days turn to weeks, however, and as word filters in of atrocities committed by both sides, she and her fellow prisoners find themselves confronted with the moral complexities of the conflict. Two TDs were shot, leaving the Dail; Sean Hales is dead, and O Maille is wounded. There will be reprisals, and republican prisoners will be executed. Dorothy jolts in and out of nightmares as the sound of pickaxes and digging graves are heard. The next morning, the women carry out their morning tasks as they wait for the sound of the firing squad. It is Lily, who heard the 1916 executions from her cell, who confirms the sound of the shots. This next scene begins in the common area where Dorothy is sitting among a group of women.

Scene 4 - Feast of the Immaculate Conception

The scene explores the Moral complexities of the Civil War and Macardle's Political Development. It distinguishes between the militant and non-militant women prisoners and the tensions growing between the two groups in prison.



DIRECTOR Dorothy was moved twice during her six-month incarceration, first from Mountjoy to Kilmainham and later from Kilmainham to the North Dublin Union. This next scene takes place after Christmas, in early January 1923. Paudeen is Paudeen O’Keefe, the infamous deputy governor of Mountjoy Prison.

Scene 5 - Moving to Kilmainham

This Scene was originally written as a character study for Pauleen O’Keefe. The significance of Kilmainham Goal to Prisoner Women. Nora Conolly and Betty are introduced. Men who once upheld the cause are now Free State Soldiers.

There is sudden excitement among the women prisoners as they pack to leave. Before loading the trucks, they wait at the grave of Kevin Barry. They journey at night through the city to Kilmainham, and Dorothy hopes to pass on a letter to her mother along the route. She has an encounter with a troubled young Free State soldier who gifts her sacred clay from Kevin Barry’s grave and agrees to post her letter. There is great immensity in arriving where the men of ’16 were executed and meeting there the daughter of James Connolly.

DIRECTOR Kilmainham lives up to Dorothy’s worst expectations, initially at least. Conditions are dreadful; it is damp and cold. She suffers nightmares and bears great sorrow at the execution of Erskine Childers in December. And yet she finds some solace. A large landing window upstairs affords a view of the bright outside world, and she uses the odd opportunity to sneak up there and look out. Springtime is approaching. She befriends Nora Connolly and finds her an inspiring person to be around. While the prison is laden with the heaviness of its history, she takes comfort that she resides where so many of her guiding heroes have served time - and often died - in past years and previous generations. As news filters in of setbacks in the war effort and the whisper of possible surrender fill the prison, her political reflections become increasingly sophisticated and prescient – already indicative, perhaps, of the political historian she would later become. The scene we have chosen to present from Kilmainham, however, reflects a different aspect of Dorothy – a moment of respite from all the political turbulence.

Scene 6 – Homemaking

Theme - Exploring the nature of women prisoners making a home in prison. A moment of respite from the political turbulence. It is Spring and we are moving into a more hopeful period.

DIRECTOR Dorothy’s diaries end abruptly in March. It is understood - and she herself has indicated - that she continued to journal thereafter, but the notebooks have not survived.

There is no first-person record, therefore, of her experience of the hunger strike, but it is known that she took part in such a protest in April 1923, which lasted about a week and took a toll on her health and well-being. Neither do we have an account of her brief time in her third prison, the North Dublin Union, prior to her release on health grounds on 10th May. We do, however, have her first-hand account of the transfer of the women from Kilmainham to the North Dublin Union on April 30th. Unlike the transfer from Mountjoy, this was a brutal affair involving acts of violence against the prisoner women. Dorothy's record of it survives in the form of a powerful article she wrote shortly after the event. We are currently working on a dramatic scene based on that episode.

We do not yet have an ending for our drama. We imagine that the benign ghostly figure we met at the beginning will still be there at the conclusion, wise, empathetic, embodying the spirit of the artist and humanitarian Dorothy Macardle.